

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUND NO. 1-0647
CHARLES WEISS/JERUSALEM

APRIL 26, 1976

ISRAEL'S DEBATE OVER THE WEST BANK

AMINCR:

ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER YICHAAL ALON HAS CANCELLED A SCHEDULED VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES IN ORDER TO TAKE PART IN HIS CABINET'S OFF-POSTPONED DEBATE ON SETTLEMENT POLICY IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES, AND PRINCIPALLY ON THE WEST BANK OF THE JORDAN RIVER. VOA CORRESPONDENT CHARLES WEISS SENDS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM JERUSALEM.

VOICE:

THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S DECISION IS THE LATEST MOVE IN WHAT SEEMS TO BE DEVELOPING AS A SHOWDOWN BETWEEN HAWKS AND DOVES IN THE CABINET. THE FATE OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF PRIME MINISTER YITZHAK RABIN MAY WELL BE AT STAKE.

THE WEST BANK OF THE JORDAN RIVER IS THE AREA OCCUPIED BY ISRAEL SINCE THE 1967 WAR. SO FAR, THE GOVERNMENT HAS RESTRICTED SETTLEMENT ON THE WEST BANK TO THOSE AREAS WHICH MORE OR LESS FOLLOW THE LINES OF MINISTER ALON'S PLAN FOR PEACE WITH JORDAN. THAT PLAN ENVISAGES GIVING MOST OF THE TERRITORY BACK TO JORDAN WHILE RETAINING A LINE OF SETTLEMENTS IN THE JORDAN RIVER VALLEY.

HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN STEADY PRESSURE TO LIFT THOSE RESTRICTIONS. IN EARLY DECEMBER, A RELIGIOUS NATIONALIST GROUP CALLING ITSELF GUSH EMUNIM -- THE FAITH BLOC -- TRIED TO SET UP AN UNAUTHORIZED VILLAGE NEAR THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL OF NABLUS. THE SETTLERS LET THEMSELVES BE REMOVED TO A NEARBY ARMY CAMP AT KAFR KADDUM IN EXCHANGE FOR A GOVERNMENT PROMISE TO REVIEW THE WHOLE QUESTION WITHIN TWO OR THREE MONTHS. NOW,

NEARLY FIVE MONTHS LATER, WITH THE SETTLERS STILL AT THE SITE, IT LOOKS AS THOUGH THE LONG-AWAITED DEBATE IS IMMINENT.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE CABINET MAJORITY IN ISRAEL'S PARLIAMENT RESTS ON THE SUPPORT OF FACTIONS WHICH TAKE DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED VIEWS ON WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ON THE WEST BANK. THE LEFTIST MAPAM FACTION -- WHICH HAS A VOTE-POOLING ARRANGEMENT WITH RABIN'S LABOR PARTY -- WANTS THE SETTLERS EVACUATED. IT SAYS ISRAEL SHOULD ADOPT A CLEAR-CUT STAND ON WHAT TERRITORY IT IS WILLING TO YIELD UP FOR PEACE.

ON THE OTHER SIDE IS THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTY, WHICH HAS THREE CABINET MINISTERS AND WHICH IS COMMITTED TO BACKING THE SETTLER'S DEMANDS. TO THE N-R-P, ALL OF PALESTINE BELONGS TO ISRAEL AS PART OF ITS BIBLICAL HERITAGE. IT HAS SAID IT WILL LEAVE THE CABINET IF IT IS DECIDED NOT TO LET GUSH EMUNIM SETTLERS STAY.

DEFENSE MINISTER SHIMON PERES, WHO HEADS THE RAFI FACTION INSIDE THE LABOR PARTY IS SCEPTICAL ANYTHING WILL EVER COME ABOUT WITH JORDAN AND HE TENDS TO SIDE WITH THE SETTLERS. IT WAS HE WHO GAVE THE PERMIT FOR GUSH EMUNIM'S MARCH TO THE WEST BANK LAST WEEK WHICH AROUSED APPREHENSIONS AMONG WEST BANK INHABITANTS.

FOREIGN MINISTER ALON CLINGS TO HIS PLAN AS THE ONLY WAY OF KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN FOR A TERRITORIAL SETTLEMENT WITH THE ARABS. A SPOKESMAN SAID THE FOREIGN MINISTER HAD INTENDED TO SEE SECRETARY OF STATE KISSINGER DURING HIS VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES, BUT CANCELLED HIS TRIP ON GROUNDS THAT UNTIL THE CABINET MAKES UP ITS MIND ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE WEST BANK, THE TWO WOULD HAVE NOTHING TO TALK ABOUT.

FORCES IN THE CABINET ARE VERY EVENLY DIVIDED, WITH LABOR'S JUNIOR MINISTERS GENERALLY TAKING LESS ULTIMATE POSITIONS. PRIME MINISTER RADIN HIMSELF HAS POINTEDLY KEPT FROM TAKING SIDES, AND HAS SEEMED MORE CONCERNED WITH KEEPING THE GOVERNMENT IN OFFICE THAN IN FAVORING ONE STAND OR THE OTHER.

THIS CONCERN FOR THE INTEGRITY OF HIS CABINET IS SEEN BY MOST OBSERVERS AS THE CHIEF REASON THE ISSUE HAS BEEN SO LONG IN COMING UP FOR A FULL-FLEDGED DEBATE.

-0-

GH/PY